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Am I Normal? Informing the public about psychosis through websites and beer mats.

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Well devised information campaigns about psychosis have been shown to reduce stigmatising attitudes and reduce the time psychosis is left untreated. The following paper describes an information campaign initiated by two Early Intervention in Psychosis (EIP) Services.

Awareness raising campaigns

Stigmatising attitudes and misconceptions about people with severe mental illnesses such as psychosis, severely affect the lives of individuals with these conditions (Holmes et al., 1999). Across the world, stigma causes immense suffering in terms of stress, depression, interpersonal difficulties, restricted access to education, social participation and employment (Van Brakel, 2006). Importantly, it can also interfere with help seeking, as individuals attempt to avoid being labelled as mentally ill (Corrigan, 2004).

Because of perceived dangerousness and their distinctive, even “bizarre”, symptomatology, people with psychosis have historically experienced stigmatisation and discrimination. Unfortunately, psychosis remains associated with negative media

coverage and public imagery today (Schulze et al., 2003). This is partly due to a lack of information about the disorder, with studies suggesting that members of the general public who have more knowledge about mental illness and more personal contact with those affected, are less likely to endorse stigmatising attitudes. This may be due to these factors challenging the misconceptions that underlie stigmatizing beliefs (Holmes et al., 1999).

The original remit of Early Intervention in Psychosis (EIP) services within the UK, was not only to intervene earlier with people experiencing psychosis, but also to raise awareness and challenge stigma associated with the disorder. One of the reasons for this is that treatment delay or long duration of untreated psychosis (DUP) has been found to negatively affect patient outcome (Perkins et al., 2005). Thus EIP services may reduce symptom severity and duration, by encouraging individuals to seek help earlier, training professionals and the general public to recognise the earliest symptoms, reduce the stigma associated with help seeking and streamline the referral pathway to services. Indeed, findings from the Treatment and Intervention in Psychosis (TIPS) study highlighted this point and the role information campaigns can play (Joa et al., 2008). It also appears that this information feed needs to be continuous, since it was found that when information campaigns were discontinued, new referrals had a significantly longer DUP and severity of symptoms.

Previous campaigns informing the public and professional groups about psychosis have taken several forms and include: local and national media advertisements (Joa et al., 2008), websites (Burns et al., 2007; Joa et al., 2008), public and academic lectures, seminars and courses (Holmes et al., 1999; Schulze et al., 2003) plays, art

exhibitions and films (Gaebel & Baumann, 2003). The majority of these campaigns are often pitched at young people (aged between 15 - 24 years of age) in order to challenge stereotypes before they become fixed, but also because adolescence and early adulthood represent the peak onset for psychosis. Interestingly, surveys suggest that this age group is most likely to turn to the internet as opposed to telephone help lines and community professionals for help and support (Burns et al., 2007).

The Am I Normal Campaign

Four EIP services in the north east of England set out to develop a new, economically viable marketing campaign. The three main aims were to educate the general public and professional groups about the early signs and symptoms of psychosis, provide normalizing information (the commonplace nature of mental health problems) and clarify referral pathways to EIP services. The project team consisted of several clinical psychologists, an assistant psychologist and a service manager working within EIP services in two neighbouring NHS Mental Health Trusts. The website was funded through non recurring monies from several local Primary Care Trusts and the two Mental Health Trusts¹.

The main focus of the campaign was the development of the website www.aminormal.org which was launched in April 2009. Throughout the design and consultation process, emphasis was placed upon the messages of recovery and normalisation. The sites main features include an interactive and audio explanation of what causes psychosis, frequently asked questions, personal stories about psychosis

¹ The official cost breakdown for the project can be obtained by contacting the authors.

and recovery, advice for family and friends and national and local contact details of services who can help.

In order to signpost the public to this website several promotional materials were produced including beer mats, posters and leaflets. Each EIP team has distributed these materials to their locality alongside their day to day clinical duties where possible. Schools, colleges, bars and GP surgeries have been some of the places already targeted.

Since the launch of the site, other EIP teams across the country have contacted the project team to add their details to the website and to purchase the supporting promotional material². To maintain the momentum of the project, the website has been further advertised in professional magazines such as the 'The Psychologist' and academic newsletters within the NHS. Initial feedback suggests that many EIP clinicians within the two trusts are using the website as a therapeutic tool to inform current service users and their families about the symptoms and causes of psychosis.

The website has acted as a springboard for developing a much wider marketing strategy with extra funding being allocated to the project by the local Primary Care Trusts. With the help and dedication of a local film maker, a 30 second cinema style advert has been produced as well as several documentaries involving service users and carers detailing their experiences of psychosis and recovery.

Looking to the future

² For Early intervention Services who are interested in adding their details to the website please contact the authors.

The major focus in the forthcoming months and years is the maintenance, evaluation and expansion of the project. Thankfully, funding is already in place to maintain and update the website for the foreseeable future. Although the project is not for profit, other services wishing to use the website and other materials will be charged a small fee. Primarily, this provides the necessary funding in order to maintain and update information on the website.

The amount of funding invested in the project requires a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of the campaign. Recording how many people visit the website and the geographical location of these viewers has been taking place since the website's launch. All new EIP referrals complete a very brief questionnaire to ascertain if they have accessed any of the campaign's materials, and their impact on their decision to seek help. Ideally we hope to demonstrate that the duration of untreated psychosis, alongside the need for police involvement and hospital admissions, will have fallen since the advent of the campaign. At the moment we are discussing an appropriate methodology to achieve this.

Plans to evaluate the cinema advert via a focus group and a short survey are under development too. As with any research in this area we need to investigate and ensure any changes in attitude and reductions in DUP are maintained over the longer term and whether any changes in attitude about psychosis and mental health problems correspond to reduced stigmatisation/discrimination (changes in behaviour).

Finally, at the time of writing (late 2009) an exciting opportunity has arisen for the cinema advert and the documentaries to be officially launched at a mental health film festival within the local area. It is hoped that the event will be attended by service users, carers, NHS commissioners, celebrities and the media which will help the campaign reach a larger/national audience.

Summary

Information campaigns about psychosis are an essential part of challenging stigma, streamlining the referral pathway to EIP services and improving patient outcomes. Work is ongoing to evaluate the effectiveness of the Am I Normal project. We hope that our campaign can demonstrate reductions in the duration of untreated psychosis for the targeted population, educate the public and other professionals about psychosis and ensure people know where to access help. Although not initially designed to be used in this way, our website appears to be a useful therapeutic tool for clinicians working with individuals and families affected by psychosis. We encourage other health professionals to educate the public and raise awareness about their own areas of work (in any way they can), in order to reduce the stigmatisation that still surrounds mental health today.

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